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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SARAJEVO 001231

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BK](#)

SUBJECT: BOSNIA: AFTER MONTENEGRO, BIH SERBS TAKE UP  
REFERENDUM THEME

REF: A. SARAJEVO 1095

[B](#). SARAJEVO 1194

Classified By: Ambassador Douglas L. McElhaney, for reasons 1.4 (B) AND  
(D).

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: In the wake of the Montenegro referendum, Bosnian Serbs have raised the possibility of a vote here that would determine whether the Republika Srpska (RS) remains part of the Bosnian state. Statements May 27 by RS Premier Milorad Dodik speculating on the possibility of a referendum on RS independence have radicalized Bosnian political rhetoric and risk further alienating him from the Office of the High Representative (OHR) and other International Community (IC) representatives in Bosnia. Reactions from all sides to Dodik's statements have been predictable, if problematic in their own right, ranging from Bosniak Muslim pundits impugning the U.S.-brokered constitutional reform efforts as separatist, to increased attention to the Serb radical fringe, to talk within the Office of the High Representative (OHR) of use of the Bonn Powers. Following Dodik's statements, the Ambassador warned him of the corrosive effect of referendum comments, reiterating a previous message that Kosovo's status (as well as the Montenegrin issue) should be kept out of the Bosnian electoral campaign. The Embassy continues to liaise with local politicians and internationals to mitigate the results of Dodik's remarks and to prevent, as much as possible, a recurrence. END SUMMARY.

DODIK'S REFERENDUM MUSINGS...

[2](#). (SBU) In a wide-ranging interview in Sarajevo's "Oslobodjenje" May 27, RS Premier Milorad Dodik criticized the international community and its positions on a number of issues, including police reform, and broached the hypersensitive issue of independence referenda in the Balkans. Dodik greeted the results of Montenegro's recent referendum and asked "If one party has the right to a referendum, why shouldn't others?" Dodik opined that the referendum "could be a good model to solve the fate of Kosovo" and added that Montenegro's referendum could "show the way how the democratic process of splitting should be promoted," something he described as "instructive for Bosnia and Herzegovina."

... LEAD TO SHARP REACTIONS FROM LOCALS, IC

[3](#). (SBU) Predictably in this pre-election period, local reactions to Dodik's message were swift and fierce. Bosniak

politicians and pundits assailed Dodik's remarks, saying they revealed his true separatist intentions. Haris Silajdzic's Party for Bosnia and Herzegovina (SBiH) called for a referendum on the level of the whole of BiH to dissolve the RS, while representatives of the Bosniak Party for Democratic Action in the RS National Assembly (RSNA) said that Serbs were free to leave BiH, but not to take the land. One journalist in Sarajevo's "Oslobodjenje" used Dodik's remarks to attack the USG-brokered constitutional reform project, saying that Dodik's interest in pushing for constitutional changes was to prepare the ground for his referendum plans. In the RS, meanwhile, radical and nationalist fringe politicians like the pro-independence "Serbian National Movement - The Choice is Yours" supported Dodik's statements and capitalized on them through increased attention and press coverage.

¶4. (C) International reaction was immediate, as well. Principal Deputy High Representative Lawrence Butler publicly asked Dodik to explain his remarks, while High Representative Christian Schwarz-Schilling, in a visit to Belgrade, reasserted that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of BiH were not up for a vote. Ambassadors accredited to Sarajevo were particularly upset with Dodik's pointed remarks questioning the motives for their interventions in BiH. Some OHR and IC representatives even spoke openly of the possibility of using the High Representative's Bonn Powers either to avoid a referendum or to punish Dodik.

AMBASSADOR PRIVATELY REBUKES DODIK

¶5. (C) In a private conversation May 29, the Ambassador rebuked Dodik for his irresponsible remarks, noting with particular dismay how they came just days after his request

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not to raise the issue of Kosovo in the BiH press. The Ambassador warned of the corrosive effects of such statements both within BiH and for Dodik's relations with the IC, noting that the chief beneficiaries of the furor caused by such statements were radical Bosniak politicians like SBiH's Haris Silajdzic. Dodik offered no defense for the referendum remarks, though he said that he hadn't intended to group the Ambassador with other chiefs of mission he referred to negatively in the article.

¶6. (C) Subsequent to the release of the "Oslobodjenje" piece, Dodik attempted to walk back from the referendum statements somewhat in an article published in the May 28 "Nezavisne Novine." In this piece Dodik said that the question of "BiH: Yes or No?" had been answered long ago, but that the question of what form BiH would take remained. RS President Dragan Cavic largely steered clear of the debate, while offering an oblique public criticism of Dodik for promoting a policy (the referendum) that he could not deliver. Dodik surrogates, meanwhile, have continued to walk his statements back. The leader of Dodik's Association of Independent Social Democrats in the RSNA, Krstan Simic, said in the May 31 "Glas Srpske" that Dodik, as a legalist, would not organize any referendum, and only mentioned it as a possibility.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: In this pre-election period (national elections will take place in October), we expect this will not be the last we hear of Serb politicians trying to take advantage of separatist sentiment. As Kosovo negotiations proceed this year, the political temperature will likely rise, with Serbs in BiH calling for "the same right" to leave Bosnia as Kosovars are demanding from Serbia. Despite our early warnings to Serb politicians not to use Kosovo, or Montenegro for that matter, to advance their election fortunes, there will be a continuing low-level drumbeat on "self-determination" as long as the Kosovo status process goes on. As we have already been doing publicly and privately, we will need to tamp this down. High Representative Schwarz-Schilling has jumped the gun a bit

(see septel reporting) by implying the use of extraordinary Bonn powers against the Serbs if they pursue the referendum course; his reaction demonstrates the jitters of the international community about spillover into Bosnia of events elsewhere in the Western Balkans. END COMMENT.  
MCELHANEY